

# **HUMANITIES COUNCIL**

OF WASHINGTON, DC

## **DEFINING THE HUMANITIES— A WORK IN PROGRESS**

**COMPILED BY THE HUMANITIES COUNCIL  
OF WASHINGTON, DC**

## Humanities Council of Washington, DC – Functional Humanities

For 30 years, State Humanities Councils have been exploring ways to engage “the public,” (i.e. citizens who are not formally involved in the academy,) in the lifelong study of the humanities. They have responded to this challenge by examining and widening the definition of “expert” in the humanities, and increasing the value placed on the role of discussion among citizens.

As we at the Humanities Council of Washington, DC pursue the most comprehensive and compelling ways to fulfill our mission, we have begun to focus on the concept of “functional humanities.”

- *The Humanities* are the disciplines that help us understand and define cultures, and human experience, including history, anthropology, literature, art history, ethics, philosophy and jurisprudence.
- *Public humanities programs* are programs targeted at the non-academic public, which use humanities ideas, disciplines and concepts.
- *Functional humanities programs* are public humanities programs that place the disciplines and concepts of the humanities in the context of the general public’s common experiences and activities.

The goal of functional humanities programming is to assist the public in understanding the social, cultural, historical and ethical context of their roles in their jobs, neighborhoods, communities, and organizations, and to provide people tools to take meaningful action to advance their communities. Functional humanities programs use intellectual resources that are accessible and engaging to people with diverse experiences and backgrounds. By illuminating common experiences we allow participants to understand them with greater awareness and appreciation of their content.

The Humanities Council of Washington, DC is constantly developing relevant humanities programming that addresses the community-identified needs of Washington residents and creates a measurable impact on their lives. The Humanities Council envisions functional humanities programming as a creative approach to securing and developing responsible civic awareness and participation.

*-Updated by Joy Austin*

12/14/2009

## **The humanities: It's not about what they are; it's what we do**

*By Keira Amstutz, president and CEO of the Indiana Humanities Council.*

Once, after a dance performance, Isadora Duncan was asked what the dance *meant*. Her response has become famous as a terse description of art's purpose: "If I could tell you what it meant," she said, "there would be no point in dancing it."

In my role as president and CEO of the Indiana Humanities Council, I often find myself being asked, "What are the humanities?" And sometimes, like Isadora Duncan, I think it'd be easier to dance than answer the question.

Why? Because sometimes describing the humanities is like describing the wind – it's easier to say what it does than what it is. It swirls leaves on an autumn sidewalk. It teases a little girl's hair. It pulses through a wheat field like waves on a landlocked sea.

So, I thought I'd explain what the humanities are by explaining what you can do – and perhaps already do – in, through and with them every day.

I don't pretend that this list is conclusive; I know it only scratches the surface. But I hope that it will, in its breadth and diversity, allow you to create – and, more important, put into action – your own definition of the humanities. So, let's get started:

Read a novel. Read a poem. Read the directions on a shampoo bottle. Read the Declaration of Independence. Read a blog. Read an essay. Read a review of a book you'll never read. Read a sacred text. Read your diary. Read to a kid. Read the liner notes to an old jazz album. Read the lyrics to a song you love. Read a libretto.

See a play with a friend. Go early. Wander through the theater. View the stage from different angles. Peruse the program. Learn about the actors. Watch the play. Study the set. Notice the lighting. Listen to reactions. Find a place to have coffee. Discuss the play. Go to another play. Repeat the process.

Visit a courtroom. Visit a classroom. Visit an old teacher. Visit a park. Visit a museum. Visit a library. Visit City Hall. Visit a college campus. Visit a craftsman's workbench. Visit an artist's studio.

Look at a piece of art. Study it. Step back. Look at the piece beside it. Ask yourself: Why are these pieces next to each other? Why is this art? Step back again. Ask yourself: Does the size of the room affect the way I look at the art? Step back again. How does seeing more change the way you see the art?

Listen to a band. Listen to a debate. Listen to a well-tuned machine. Listen to a podcast. Listen to a diner ordering dinner. Listen to a photographer describing a photo. Listen to an architect explaining a building's design.

Stop outside a building you pass every day; look at its design. Do you know the name for the architectural style? Do you like it? What appeals to you? What would you do differently? Get a book about architecture and learn about the style. Find other examples of that style and compare them. Find examples of other styles and compare them. Take a walk with a colleague and debate the architecture you see.

Attend a historic-home tour. Attend a lecture. Attend the symphony. Attend a gallery reception. Attend a festival. Attend a legislative session. Attend opening night (of anything). Attend a public forum.

Speak at a public forum. Sing in a choir. Yell “Bravo” at a concert. Ask a question. Tell someone your family’s history. Recite a poem. Describe a work of art. Say what you think.

Now, think about what you’ve done. You’ve examined, studied and reviewed something made by humans or something that makes us human. You’ve thought about it, pondered it and processed it. And you’ve talked about it, debated it and discussed it.

That’s what the humanities are.

## Defining the Humanities—A work in Progress

The humanities are stories passed from generation to generation to transmit culture. These stories are also known as our history, literature, laws, ethics, religion, philosophy, anthropology etc.

*-Georgia Humanities Council*

We work with a one-word definition: "stories." Everyone has one, and together, they create the fabric of our lived communities.

*-Jamil S. Zainaldin, Georgia Humanities Council*

Somebody -- maybe Dan Shilling -- once suggested using "culture" wherever it would fit, which is sometimes. I use "history" as a stand-in or at least example, again where appropriate. Everyone understands the other "h" word, anyway.

*-Ken Sullivan, Georgia Humanities Council*

The Humanities are our individual stories and the stories of our lives in community that help transmit knowledge to succeeding generations.

*-Georgia Humanities Council*

[The humanities] promote history and heritage, literature and literacy, and public discussion of vital community issues. [The humanities] promote understanding of human traditions, values, and issues through informed public discussion.

*-Utah Humanities Council*

The Humanities: "history, literature, and the ideas that shape democracy."

*-Missouri Council*

Put simply, the humanities are the human face of culture. We can think of the humanities as a group of questions: What does our culture stand for? What does it mean to be human? Can an individual make a difference?

The answers can be sought in all products of human expression, individual and communal: in Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in Martin Luther King's Letter from Birmingham Jail, and in the Diary of Anne Frank; or in the storytelling of Illinois river towns; in the murals in Pilsen or Hmong needlework in Uptown; in Egyptian pyramids or the earth mounds near East St. Louis, shaped by ancient cultures; and even in old "I Love Lucy" shows.

We can also think of the public humanities as a group of people, scholars and citizens together, bound by an interest in sorting out important questions of the day or by a desire to enrich their understanding of their own history and culture.

When people listen, talk, think and then talk with each other again about what is important to them, whether it is understanding the Middle East, preserving the

environment, or learning about the founding of their community or our nation, the humanities are there enriching our lives.

Finally, think of the humanities as a group of disciplines that both mirror and interpret what human beings have believed, experienced and celebrated in our own and other cultures; in our time and throughout the centuries.

As branches of learning, the humanities include the study of history; literature; linguistics; philosophy; ethics; jurisprudence; comparative religion; and history, theory, and criticism of the arts. Social sciences that employ qualitative approaches such as cultural anthropology, archaeology, political science and international relations, and interdisciplinary areas such as folklore, women's studies and American studies, for example, are also considered humanities disciplines.

The disciplines of the humanities help us make connections. They connect small questions to large questions, our neighborhoods to the world, and our time to other times and places. An important part of our formal education, the humanities, however, go well beyond the classroom and the campus.

*-Illinois Humanities Council*

The term 'humanities' includes, but is not limited to, the study and interpretation of the following: language, both modern and classical; linguistics; literature; history; jurisprudence; philosophy; archeology; comparative religion; ethics; the history, criticism, and theory of the arts; those aspects of the social sciences which have humanistic content and employ humanistic methods; and the study and application of the humanities to the human environment with particular attention to reflecting our diverse heritage, traditions, and history and to the relevance of the humanities to the current conditions of national life.

*-The Congressional Act establishing the National Endowment for the Humanities*

“While it was doubtless necessary to draw boundaries in this way, we think it is misleading to regard the humanities basically as a set of academic disciplines or, even more restricting, as a set of ‘great books.’ We identify them, rather, with certain ways of thinking---of inquiring, evaluating, judging, finding, and articulating meaning. They include the developed human talents from which texts and disciplines spring. They are, taken together, the necessary resources of a reflective approach to life. The value of a reflective approach can be best appreciated by considering the alternative: a life unilluminated by imagination, unformed by history, unguided by reasoning---in short, the ‘unexamined life’ that Socrates described as not worth living. Where the humanities are vigorous, action follows from and is guided by reflection. It is their capacity to change, elevate, and improve both the common civic life and individual lives that make the cultivation of the humanities important to the American people.”

*-The Humanities and the American Promise*

The humanities are characterized by *intellectual activity* that is *rational* and which focuses upon the *products of man*. The humanities are an effort to achieve human understanding. They are an investigation into the nature of man. As human activities, the humanities are distinguished from all of those things which are not activities or are nonhuman activities. As intellectual activities, they are distinguished from a great many other human activities, such as jogging and manufacturing, cooking and playing, banking and loving. As rational activities, the humanities are founded upon reason. 'Understanding' means understanding in terms of reasons, rather than understanding based upon habits of thought, faith, or mystical experience. The humanities focus upon the products of man--works of literature, art, and music, systems of language, religion, law, and philosophy, the artifacts and structures of past civilizations, and patterns of political, social, and individual behavior.

*-The Humanities and Public Life* William L. Blizek

When we ask who we are and what our lives ought to mean, we are using the humanities.

*- Nebraska Humanities Council*

*"I thank you to listen..."*

With this phrase, Tlingit elder Austin Hammond captured the essential function of the humanities: to tell our stories and have them listened to by others. The phrase implies a courtesy of interaction, which is an inherent part of sharing information, ideas, values, perspectives, and cultures. Through sharing at all levels, we create community. Through sharing our daily lives, we join in the human search for meaning in the places we live. The humanities offer us opportunities to learn from the past, explore the present and take part in shaping the future; the humanities provide adventures for the mind.

*-The Alaska Humanities Forum*

*"The humanities are the study of human culture with particular emphasis on the liberal arts; the cultural implications of the natural sciences, social sciences, and professions; and on individual philosophic self-expressions."*

*- New Mexico Endowment for the Humanities*

The Humanities, as such, are the stories, ideas, and wisdom that help us make sense of our lives and our world. Throughout our lives, the humanities introduce us to people we've never met, places we've never been, and ideas that may never before have crossed our minds. By showing us how others have lived, made decisions, and thought about life, the humanities help us decide what's important in our own lives and what we can do to make them better. And connecting us with other people, they point the way to answers about what's right or wrong or what's true to our heritage and our history. The Humanities help us address the challenges we face together in our families, our towns and cities and as a nation."

*-Northern Mariana Islands Council for the Humanities*

The humanities are the study of what we are, what we have been, and what we can become. They are concerned with values and choices, and with making intellectual, moral, and spiritual sense of the world. The humanities help us to analyze our complex society, and to make thoughtful, reasoned decisions. The humanities help us to make connections. They connect small questions to large issues, our neighborhoods to the world, and our own experiences to other times and places.”

*-Utah Humanities Council*

The humanities are the stories, ideas, and writings that help us make sense of our lives and enhance our ability to think critically and creatively about our world.

*-Washington Commission for the Humanities*

Humanity in all its forms. The humanities are the values by which we live, the ideas that organize our thinking, and all of the ways we communicate with each other. History. Literature. Folklife. Religion. Culture. The origins of Bluegrass music. The archaeology of landfills. Kentuckians' love for their counties. What they teach their children. Why they make burgoos. All these things are the humanities.

*-Kentucky Humanities Council*

The humanities help us understand ourselves and our worlds, and they help us communicate that understanding to others. You are practicing the humanities when you:

- Hear someone's story, tell your own, or try to place those stories within the larger story of your family, community, or state;
- Imagine yourself in someone else's shoes—including those of another culture or time—or help someone else to experience life in your shoes;
- Discuss the meaning of a film or book or event;
- Question the history of an idea, or place, or people;
- Ask whether an idea is true, or a value is sound, or an action is ethical; or
- Examine an artifact to learn about its creator or meaning.

The humanities rely on dialogue, and they help us connect with one another, with our heritage, and with our communities.”

*-California Council for the Humanities*

The humanities are areas of study distinguished by their focus on the uniquely human elements of our world. They examine and interpret the individual's place in the whole human enterprise: our language, our past, our present society and our future as a species. Unlike the natural sciences and certain branches of social sciences, which aim at quantitative explanation and description, the humanities explicitly address questions of value – not only what is and has been significant in human thought and action, but why it has been so. And although the humanities have much in common with the arts, they are analytical rather than expressive, reflective rather than active, critical rather than intuitive. Collectively, the humanities reflect our curiosity about ourselves and the creations of human culture.

*-The Connecticut Humanities Council*

The humanities are at the center of learning. They include the study of reading, writing, language, and thinking. They are also the investigation of the ideas, stories, and themes of all times and peoples, and are the key to understanding the diversity and richness of all cultures.

- *Minnesota Humanities Commission*

What are the humanities, and how do they relate to the "real" world? Ask a random group of people, and you will rarely get the same definition twice. Contrary to popular belief, however, the humanities are not restricted to only being experienced in the sphere of academia--most people experience at least one branch of the humanities in the course of their daily living! With so many people today unaware of the purpose of the humanities, it's important we focus on and understand how we experience the humanities each day. The humanities are part of the common human experience, connecting us to each other and our communities in a unique way. The humanities not only exist within the "real" world, they define it. A museum exhibit about the pharaohs of ancient Egypt, a spirited philosophical discussion about human existence or interacting with people of different cultures in your hometown are all experiences grounded in the humanities. The humanities keep us in touch with ourselves and with others. They open up the world to us, enriching our human experience. They offer us the opportunity to learn from the past, explore the present, and shape the future. They are about culture, community, and connections. Quite simply, they are about what make us human.

- Traditionally humanities disciplines include:
  - African-American Studies
  - American Studies
  - Anthropology
  - Archaeology
  - Architectural
  - Art History and Criticism
  - Classics
  - Democracy
  - Economics
  - Education
  - Ethics
  - Ethnic Studies
  - Folklore
  - Geography
  - History
  - History & Ethics of Science
  - International Studies
  - Jurisprudence
  - Languages and Linguistics
  - Literature
  - Music History and Criticism

- Philosophy
- Political Science
- Psychology
- Religion and Comparative Religion
- Sociology
- Social Sciences
- Theatre History and Criticism
- Women's Studies

*-Humanities Iowa*

"The arts do it; the humanities talk about it."

*-Anonymous*

The Humanities explore, compare and preserve the observations, ideas and acts unique to mankind. The Humanities are our short-term and long-term collective memory.

*-D. M. Towner*

Every leader requires an understanding of what has gone before---the wisdom and errors of the ages, as conveyed by the best works of history, biography, literature, and philosophy.

*-Theodore C. Sorensen*

To nourish our nation's spirit-to raise our sights, stretch our minds, and expand our horizons. That is what the humanities can do for us all...

*-Theodore C. Sorensen*

By nourishing an appreciation for history, literature, and philosophy, we instill in our citizens ideas and values that form strong communities and renew our share in the good life.

*-Nebraska Humanities Council*

The humanities profoundly enrich both our private lives and our civic communities. Public humanities programs help us to understand complex social issues through the multiple lenses of interpretive disciplines such as history, literature, and philosophy. Through the humanities, we hone skills of inquiry, analysis, reflection, evaluation, and conversation. The humanities strengthen ties between people, between the past and the present, and between idealism and action. The humanities provide a framework for examining how we think, what we value, and what it means to be human. Programs that encourage thoughtful consideration of these questions and provide the historical, social, and philosophical contexts with which to do so are at the core of the public humanities

*-Washington Commission for the Humanities*

The humanities lead us to a deeper understanding of the human experience. They explore the story of our time and culture and that of others.

*-West Virginia Humanities Council*

The arts and humanities are particularly powerful means by which people may turn their communities into places of learning.

*-Connecting Californians*

Over time, society lives by its culture, for good or ill. A crucial role is played by the humanities in the broad sense, for they profoundly affect a people's fundamental sense of reality and innermost dreams. In the end, these are what determine the long-term evolution of society. Any real and lasting renewal of society must start in the humanities, in the mind and the imagination—in universities and schools, literature and the arts. To change society more than superficially it is necessary to change the basic orientation of the culture.

*-National Humanities Institute*

The humanities help us to feel a connection---recognition and concern---with other human beings, to be able to put ourselves mentally and emotionally into the circumstances of others.”

- “Value and Opportunity in the Public Humanities” Ester Macintosh

*Texas Journal of Ideas, History and Culture*

Aristotle and Plato are acknowledged as the originators of the encyclopedia as a means of providing comprehensive knowledge. Their fields of study included grammar, rhetoric, music, mathematics, geography, natural history and philosophy and were referred to in Latin as *Humanitas*. Together, these fields were also known as the “circle of Knowledge” [or] *Enkylios-paidei*, from which the term encyclopedia derives.

*-William R. Ferris*

The humanities are the study of the human experience, including law, religion, literature, ethics, and history. These sciences seek to tell the human story—the story of humanity. They help us to gain knowledge of the past, provide perspective for the present and guidance for the future. They teach us about others and help us to know ourselves. In doing so they assist us in deciding what is important in our own lives and what we can do to make them better. The humanities instruct us in addressing the challenges we face together in our families, our communities and as a nation. They can also be a source of pride.

*-Humanities Council of Washington, DC*

The Humanities Council of Washington, DC thanks everyone who forwarded a reply in response to our query “How do you define the Humanities?” The Council extends a special thank you to Peter Beeson for his extensive research and Beverly Nyberg for crafting our working definition of the Humanities.

We encourage you all to continue the good work. Please continue to forward definitions to the Council and periodically, we will update and circulate the definitions.

Thank you.

